

Stress management means understanding and addressing workplace issues

BY UYEN VU

When employers consider stress management strategies, they too often roll out programs built around the notion that stress is an individual problem.

Take for example workshops on time management, lunch-and-learns on stressors and ways to deal with them, even employee assistance programs that provide confidential counseling.

The premise of these programs is that the solution lies with the individual, when in fact, burnout has to be solved at an organizational level, said Acadia University psychology professor Michael Leiter, one of the world's leading researchers on job stress and burnout.

"A lot of organizations are rather unsympathetic. The assumption is people who burn out are weak, and organizations would be better off getting rid of them," said Leiter.

Leiter places the source of burnout somewhere between the individual and the organization, at the interaction between an individual's thoughts and feelings about the work and the actual work setting. For some 20 years now, he has been working with Christina Maslach at University of California at Berkeley, the psychology professor who developed the widely used Maslach Burnout Inventory, initially developed to measure burnout among health and education workers. The instrument, which Leiter helped adapt for the general workforce, detects burnout by measuring three key aspects of work engagement: energy, involvement and effectiveness.

An employee who's stressed out will report feeling exhausted day after day. The workload is simply overwhelming. In organizations he works with, said Leiter, he'll typically find five per cent who struggle to find the energy to go to work and do their job.

"There are people who say every sin-

gle day they feel exhausted before they even get out of bed. To feel that every day. That's a very serious state of mind," said Leiter.

More often than not, exhaustion feeds into the other two aspects of disengagement: cynicism and inefficacy. People who struggle to stay on top of their work tend to develop coping strategies, and one common strategy is to distance oneself from the job. They'll grow indifferent to the quality of the work or the needs of the customers they deal with. They become cynical about what they do. They'll also start to feel out of control, ineffect-

al in their job, and incapable.

It's one thing to measure a level of exhaustion and cynicism and ineffectiveness in an employee population, but the question of why workers burn out is a little more tricky. Leiter uses as an example the high-energy, high-intensity work environment of an emergency room as compared to the more subdued, typically routine work of caregivers at a geriatric home. One would expect that the ER staff, who are more likely to deal with intense, stressful situations, are more susceptible to burnout. But that's not always the case.

Working with Maslach, Leiter developed a framework to explain why some people suffer burnout and others don't. They look for mismatch between a worker and six areas of the job environment: workload, control, reward, community, fairness and values.

Of the six, workload is an area that's most directly linked to exhaustion. Overwork depletes a worker's level of energy, but so does the wrong kind of work. Emotional work, where people are required to display emotions that are at



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odds with how they're feeling, can also be taxing on a worker's energy.

A mismatch in control occurs either when an individual has too little authority over how the job is done or when the person is overwhelmed by the level of responsibility. A mismatch in reward can refer to insufficient compensation, an absence of social recognition or a lack of intrinsic reward, such as pride in the work.

A mismatch in community — the way people relate to each other at the job — can contribute to burnout. People thrive in settings where there's support, camaraderie, and humour. Some workplaces, however, isolate people from one another, and others are filled with unresolved conflict, unhealthy competition and harassment.

A mismatch in fairness can occur when there's unequal treatment in promotion, workload or pay, when grievances aren't dealt with or when managers mete out punishments without giving the worker a say. And a mismatch in values takes place when the work involves acts that employees consider unethical, such as having to be deceptive in making a sale.

Interplay among these six areas can mitigate or exacerbate the level of frustration or engagement employees feel. Referring to the example of the ER and the geriatric home, Leiter said the workload may be higher in the ER, but a sense of intrinsic satisfaction may compensate for it. And even if the tasks are manageable at the geriatric home, a sense of community may be lacking if workers can't connect with the patients they care for. "The social milieu, whom you interact with, that can be the highlight of your day. It's an important factor in what kind of balance you have."

Using the six areas as a guide, said Leiter, what organizations should do by way of intervention is to draw up a working group "that's fairly representative," with someone from the executive team, someone from the HR department, key managers, as well as front-

line employees from different divisions.

"It's essentially about getting into a problem-solving approach and brainstorming on the solutions," said Leiter. At one organization, the executive team was shocked to discover that workers perceived a high level of unfairness.

"It was a good issue to work on, because everybody could come together on it quite quickly, and it involved making the procedures around promotion and travel money and all that transparent. A number of decisions that had been the prerog-

ations of various forms essentially say that with better strategies, you can manage your time and energy, or that you can become stronger and deal with the demands of your work. I think there's some value to that, but I also think there's a limit as to how far you can go," said Leiter.

"If the place you're working in has serious problems, or if your work assignments are literally impossible to fulfill, then you can learn a whole lot, and you still have a problem. You may gain some better insight into how awful your problems are. And a lot of EAP work is in-

"A lot of EAP work is individual counselling. So people go in and they emote about things a little and they learn a few skills and they go right back out there, back where they were before."

ative of the middle manager became the responsibility of the manager and a couple of other people. And there were mechanisms for front-line employees to get involved in the committee that made these decisions."

One year later, fairness measures clocked the highest improvement in the followup survey. "These were the kinds of things that people were concerned about, and once these mechanisms were put in place, the issue of fairness was alleviated across the organization."

Leiter was recently named Research Chair in Occupational Health and Well-being, a post that comes with \$1.4 million budget for seven years. He's looking forward to conducting further research into the causes of job stress and burnout. He acknowledges that there seems to be a movement toward corporate wellness, but on the other hand, work has become more and more stressful. Information technology, instead of being the time-saver it purports to be, has only made work more pervasive in people's lives, disrupting their cycles of recovery, he said.

And as for the increasing attention paid to corporate wellness, so much of it results in programs that treat the individual.

"The educational interven-

dividual counselling. So people go in and they emote about things a little and they learn a few skills and they go right back out there, back where they were before. And all those pressures of the behaviour setting — the space, the people, the interactions, the work, the pattern of behaviour — they push you back where you were emotionally."